



## Iceland

### Country Reports on Human Rights Practices - [2001](#)

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Iceland is a constitutional republic and a parliamentary democracy in which citizens periodically choose their representatives in free and fair multiparty elections. The Government respects the constitutional provisions for an independent judiciary in practice.

Elected officials control the police force, which is responsible for internal security and observes and enforces the laws that ensure the protection of human rights.

The country has a population of approximately 286,000. The mixed, open economy provides residents with a high standard of living. The gross domestic product during the year was estimated at \$8 billion. Fish and other marine products account for almost two-thirds of the country's revenue from goods exports. An abundance of inexpensive hydroelectric power provides a comparative advantage for aluminum smelting, the main manufacturing activity. Aluminum is the second leading export. Growth was estimated to be approximately 2 percent during the year.

The Government generally respected the human rights of its citizens, and the law and judiciary provide effective means of dealing with individual instances of abuse. Human rights monitors expressed concern about the Government's frequent use of solitary confinement for remand prisoners. The Government is taking steps to deal with violence against women. Some societal discrimination against women persists, especially in the area of equal pay. There were reports of trafficking in women for prostitution.

#### RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

##### Section 1 Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom From:

###### a. Arbitrary or Unlawful Deprivation of Life

There were no reports of the arbitrary or unlawful deprivation of life committed by the Government or its agents.

###### b. Disappearance

There were no reports of politically motivated disappearances.

###### c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

The law prohibits such practices, and there were no reports that government officials employed them.

Prison conditions generally meet international standards. Most of the country's prison population of less than 100 inmates are held at Litla Hraun Prison, which includes a state-of-the-art detention facility. However, the prison system still uses a substandard jail (Hegningarhusid, built in 1874), where the 16 individual cells lack toilets and sinks. In most cases, prisoners are kept in Hegningarhusid Prison only a short time for evaluation and processing before being transferred to another facility, and some prisoners with short sentences (less than 30 days) elect to serve their time there to be closer to friends and family.

Human rights monitors have expressed concern about the use of illegal drugs by some inmates at Litla Hraun Prison and about the lack of social services to help inmates overcome drug addiction and prepare them for eventual release. Despite the small inmate population at Litla Hraun, the authorities have not been able to stop narcotics from being smuggled into the prison.

In a 1999 report, the Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT) expressed concern that nearly all detainees at Litla Hraun continued to be placed in solitary confinement while their cases were under investigation. While the average duration of solitary confinement was between 2 and 3 weeks, the CPT noted that in some cases, solitary confinement lasted up to 3 months. Under the strictest form of solitary confinement, prisoners cannot leave their cells, except briefly to exercise alone or to use the showers, and are not allowed to listen to the radio, watch television, or receive visitors other than their lawyers, the prison doctor, and a chaplain. In 1999 the supervising doctor at Litla Hraun wrote to prison authorities, warning that the mental health of several prisoners awaiting trial on drug trafficking charges could be in danger due to the extended time that they spent in solitary confinement. During the year, the ombudsman of the Parliament investigated the use of solitary confinement as a punishment for violations of prison regulations. He concluded that the Ministry of Justice needed to adopt clearer guidelines to prevent the arbitrary use of solitary confinement by prison authorities.

Despite the Government's admission that "in the vast majority of cases" incarceration alone was sufficient to protect the integrity of the investigative process, witnesses, and evidence, the Prison and Probation Administration's statistics show that solitary confinement was the rule rather than the exception, and that most of those arrested were placed into solitary confinement, at least initially. During the first 11 months of the year, 78 of the 86 persons arrested and held on remand were put into solitary confinement, each for an average of 4 weeks. The police decide whether persons should be put in solitary confinement, but the accused may appeal this decision to the courts, which have the final say. Inmates occasionally have appealed solitary confinement, but the courts in general have allowed the police considerable leeway during the first 2 to 3 weeks of incarceration. The courts have been less willing to allow continued solitary confinement after that time.

A 1998 law allows pretrial detainees to be incarcerated with the general prison population; some human rights monitors have criticized this law. During the year, the Government budgeted planning funds for a new remand prison just outside of Reykjavik; however, construction had not begun by year's end.

Juveniles who are 15 years of age or older may be sentenced to prison terms, but the vast majority of juvenile offenders are given probation, suspended sentences, or attend a treatment program instead of going to jail. In the rare instances when juvenile offenders are incarcerated, they are confined with the adult prison population since there is no separate detention facility for juveniles. The Government has argued that such separation is not practical since the need to incarcerate a juvenile occurs so infrequently.

There is a separate minimum-security prison for women inmates. But because so few women are incarcerated, some men who have been convicted of nonviolent crimes are held there as well (with the approval of the women inmates).

The Government permits prison visits by independent human rights monitors, including by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

#### d. Arbitrary Arrest, Detention, or Exile

The Constitution prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention, and the Government generally observes these prohibitions. There was a report that police detained an asylum seeker at the airport during the year contrary to established procedures for asylum processing (see Section 2.d.).

The law prohibits forced exile, and the Government does not employ it.

#### e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The Constitution and the law provide for an independent judiciary, and the Government generally respects this provision in practice.

There are two levels of courts. A five-member Judicial Council appointed by the Minister of Justice administers the eight district courts, and the Supreme Court administers itself. All judges, at all levels, serve for life.

The law provides for the right to a fair trial, and an independent judiciary generally enforces this right. Juries are not used, but multijudge panels are common, especially in the Supreme Court, which hears all appeals.

Depending on the seriousness of the case, a Supreme Court panel can include from three to seven judges. Defendants are presumed innocent and generally are tried without delay. They are provided access to legal counsel of their own choosing with sufficient time in general to prepare their defense. For defendants unable to pay attorneys' fees, the state covers the cost, as set by the court; however, defendants are required to reimburse the state. Defendants have the right to be present at their trial, to confront witnesses, and to participate in the proceedings. No groups are barred from testifying, and all testimony is treated alike. The courts have the discretion to allow the introduction of evidence obtained illegally by the police. With limited exceptions, trials are public and conducted fairly, with no official intimidation. Defendants have the right to appeal, and appeals are handled expeditiously.

There were no reports of political prisoners.

f. Arbitrary Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

The Constitution prohibits such actions, and the Government generally respects these prohibitions in practice.

Section 2 Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Speech and Press

The Constitution provides for freedom of speech and of the press, and the Government generally respects these rights in practice. An independent press, an effective judiciary, and a functioning democratic political system combine to ensure freedom of speech and of the press, including academic freedom.

The law bans the production, exhibition, distribution, or sale of "violent" movies, which "strive to show mistreatment or the brutal killing of men or animals." A six-member Motion Picture Review Committee, appointed by the Minister of Education and Culture, reviews all movies before they are shown and rates their suitability for children. The committee has banned or required edits of several dozen films over the past 6 years.

Internet access is available and unrestricted.

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The Constitution provides for the freedoms of assembly and association, and the Government generally respects these rights in practice.

c. Freedom of Religion

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, the State financially supports and promotes an official religion, Lutheranism.

The salaries of the 146 ministers in the Lutheran state church are paid directly by the state, and these ministers are considered to be public servants under the Ministry of Justice and Ecclesiastical Affairs. The Government does not pay Lutheran ministers in the nonstate churches.

All citizens 16 years of age and above must pay a church tax of approximately \$5.50 (554.24 krona) per month. Individuals may direct their tax payments to any of the two dozen religious denominations and organizations officially recognized by the Government, including the State Lutheran Church. For individuals who are not registered as belonging to a religious organization, or who belong to one that is not registered and recognized officially by the Government, the tax payment goes to the University of Iceland, a secular institution.

Children at birth are presumed to have the same religious affiliation as their mother and are registered as such. Parents control the religious affiliation of their children until they reach the age of 16, but parents must "consult" their children about any changes in the children's affiliation after the age of 12.

By law religious instruction in Christianity is required in the public schools; however, students may be exempted.

By law religious organizations must follow specific conditions and procedures in order to be recognized officially and registered by the Government. Such recognition is necessary for religious organizations other than the state church to receive a per capita share of church tax funds from the Government. The law applies only to religious organizations that are seeking to be, or are already, officially recognized and registered. No restrictions or requirements are placed on unregistered religious organizations, which have the same rights as other groups in society.

#### d. Freedom of Movement Within the Country, Foreign Travel, Emigration, and Repatriation

The Constitution provides for these rights, and the Government generally respects them in practice.

Although neither the Constitution nor the law includes provisions for the granting of refugee or asylum status in accordance with the 1951 U.N. Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, in practice the Government adjudicates cases in accordance with their provisions. The Government cooperates with the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the ICRC, and other humanitarian organizations in assisting refugees. Human rights monitors have expressed concern about the lack of comprehensive legislation to govern the processing of asylum seekers and to provide a framework for the handling of foreigners and immigrants in general. In particular there is concern that the 1965 Supervision of Foreigners Law gives police and custom officers at ports of entry too much discretion to deny admission to asylum seekers whose claims they deem to be not credible. During the year, the police at the international airport in Keflavik reported that they denied entry to 21 asylum seekers on that basis.

The question of first asylum rarely arises. However, the Directorate of Immigration and the Icelandic Red Cross (which houses and assists asylum seekers under a contract with the Government) reported that 51 individuals applied for asylum during the year, compared with 24 in 2000. Most asylum seekers applied for asylum after entering the country, rather than at the airport; none were found to qualify for refugee status, but several cases were still under consideration at year's end. Only one asylum application has ever been approved, that of a 17-year-old individual who claimed to be fleeing from persecution in Central Africa. During the year, there was a report that police detained for 3 days an Iraqi man who claimed asylum upon arrival at the airport, before returning him to the United Kingdom--his last stop before coming to Iceland. This was contrary to established asylum procedures, which require that asylum seekers who are admitted into the country be turned over immediately to the Red Cross and the Directorate of Immigration for processing and care. Iceland became part of the Schengen free travel area on March 25, which resulted in the elimination of formal border controls on the movement of persons into Iceland from other Schengen countries.

The Government accepted 23 UNHCR-designated "quota" refugees from the former Yugoslavia during the year, continuing a program begun in 1996 of resettling 20 to 25 refugees from the region each year. Local government authorities in the towns where refugees settle take a strong interest in helping them adapt to their new environment. The Icelandic Red Cross, in cooperation with the Refugee Council of the Ministry of Social Affairs, has developed a family support program whereby at least three Icelandic families are enlisted to assist each refugee or refugee family. The refugees are granted work permits and assisted in finding jobs. For the first year, they also are given free housing, utilities, and health care and receive a stipend so that they can participate daily in a special half-day language course.

There were no reports of the forced return of persons to a country where they feared persecution.

#### Section 3 Respect for Political Rights: The Right of Citizens to Change Their Government

The Constitution provides citizens with the right to change their government peacefully, and citizens exercise this right in practice through periodic, free, and fair elections held on the basis of universal suffrage. The latest elections to the Althingi (unicameral Parliament) were held in May 1999.

The percentage of women in government and politics does not correspond to their percentage of the population, but no legal or practical impediments hinder their participation. Women hold 23 of the 63 seats in Parliament. Of the 12 government ministers, 3 are women, and 2 of 12 ministerial permanent secretaries (civil servants who function as deputy ministers) are women. Of the nine Supreme Court justices, two are women. There has been a marked increase in the number of female parliamentarians elected since the Women's List (WL), a feminist political party, was founded in 1983. The WL, which no longer exists because of a political party merger, forced the established political parties to nominate more female candidates or face losing support. As a result, women's issues moved into the mainstream of political debate, and all of the major political parties have at least one woman in a prominent leadership position.

#### Section 4 Governmental Attitude Regarding International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Violations of Human Rights

A number of domestic and international human rights groups in general operate without government restriction, investigating and publishing their findings on human rights cases. Government officials are cooperative and responsive to their views.

#### Section 5 Discrimination Based on Race, Sex, Religion, Disability, Language, or Social Status

The law prohibits discrimination based on these factors, and the Government enforces this prohibition in practice. The population is strongly egalitarian and opposed to discrimination based on any of these factors.

##### Women

Violence against women continued to be a matter of concern. Police statistics show that the incidence of violence against women—including rape and sexual assault—is low; however, the number of women seeking assistance at the public women's shelter, the counseling center, and the emergency ward of the National Hospital indicates that many incidents go unreported. Each year approximately 100 women ask for temporary lodging at the women's shelter, while 300 to 400 women and children seek assistance at the counseling center. The hospital emergency ward, which has a special staff to care for rape victims, reports that during the year, 134 women sought care associated with sexual assault or abuse. The law prohibits domestic violence and rape, including spousal rape.

The Government takes violence against women seriously; it helps finance various facilities and organizations that provide assistance to victims. The City of Reykjavik, in addition to partially funding such services, provides special help to immigrant women who find themselves in abusive relationships, offering emergency accommodation, counseling, and information on legal rights. In 2000 Parliament passed legislation that gives the courts the power to issue restraining orders, which has been a useful legal tool in protecting women from abusive husbands and boyfriends. In 1999 the Government amended the Criminal Code to provide victims of sexual crimes with lawyers to advise them of their legal rights and help them pursue cases against the alleged assailants.

Nonetheless a large majority of victims decline to press charges or choose to forgo trial, in part to avoid unwanted publicity in a small, tightly knit society. Some local human rights monitors also attribute underreporting to the fact that convictions traditionally yield light sentences: The maximum penalty for rape is 16 years, but the actual sentences imposed typically are much closer to the minimum sentence of 1 year.

The sale of sex for money is not illegal per se, but it is against the law for someone to engage in prostitution as his or her main source of income. It is also illegal to act as an intermediary in the sale or procurement of sex. There were indications that some foreign women were trafficked to work as striptease dancers or prostitutes (see Sections 6.c. and 6.f.).

The rate of participation by women in the labor market is high. In part this reflects the country's comprehensive system of subsidized day care, which makes it affordable and convenient for women to work outside the home. The law requires that preference be given to hiring and promoting women in areas where they are underrepresented, as long as they are equal in all other respects to male job seekers. Despite laws that require equal pay for equal work, a sizeable pay gap continues to exist between men and women: A 2000 survey by a union in Reykjavik showed that women, on average, earned 30 percent less than men. A 12 percent difference in pay may be attributable to the fact that men work on average 4.2 more hours per week than women, but the rest of the gap is unexplained.

In 2000 Parliament passed legislation that gives fathers the same right as mothers to paid leave upon the birth of a child. Under the law, which is expected to be fully implemented in 2003, both mothers and fathers will be allowed to take 3 months of paid leave (at 80 percent of the normal salary), with an additional 3 months that can be taken by either parent or shared between them. Previously a mother was given 6 months of paid maternity leave and the father just 2 weeks. The new leave requirements apply equally to the public and private sectors.

##### Children

The Government is strongly committed to children's rights and welfare; it amply funds a system of public education and health care. School attendance is compulsory through the age of 15 and free through public university level. Approximately 85 percent of students continue to upper secondary education, which is financed completely by the Government. The Government provides free prenatal and infant medical care, as well as heavily subsidized childcare. The Office of the Children's Ombudsman in the Prime Minister's Office has a mandate to protect children's rights, interests, and welfare by, among other things, exerting influence on

legislation, government decisions, and public attitudes and has done so.

The government-funded Agency for Child Protection coordinates the work of 56 committees around the country that are responsible for managing child protection issues (for example, adoption and foster care) in their local areas. The agency also investigates reports of child abuse through a specially designed "Children's House" (Barnahusid) and operates treatment centers for abused and troubled minors.

There is no societal pattern of abuse directed against children.

In an effort to improve the rate of prosecution of child sexual abuse and lessen the trauma to the child, the Government established the Children's Assessment Center in 1998. The objective of the center is to create a safe and secure environment where child victims feel more comfortable talking about what happened to them and are not subjected to multiple interviews. The center brings together police, prosecutors, judges, doctors, and officials from child protection services. However, a 1999 change in the Criminal Code made judges (instead of the police) responsible for the investigatory interview of abused children and allowed these interviews to be conducted in specially designed rooms at district courthouses. In 2000 the Supreme Court upheld the right of a Reykjavik district court judge to hold an investigatory interview in the courthouse rather than at the center, which has led to a significant decrease in the child sexual abuse cases being handled through the center. Human rights monitors criticized this as a step backward in the protection of children's rights.

#### Persons with Disabilities

Persons with disabilities are not subject to discrimination in employment, education, or the provision of other state services. The law provides that such persons have the right to "all common national and municipal services" and provides that they be given assistance to "make it possible for them to live and work in normal society with others." The law also provides that persons with disabilities should receive preference for a government job when they are qualified equally, or more qualified, than regular applicants.

Building regulations updated in 1998 call for public accommodations--such as hotels, restaurants, banks, and stores--as well as government buildings to be accessible so that persons in wheelchairs have access without assistance. Building regulations also specify that elevators in such buildings should be large enough to accommodate wheelchairs and that 1 percent of parking spaces (a minimum of one space) should be reserved for disabled use. Moreover, the regulations also specify that, to the extent possible, the sidewalk outside the main entrance of a public accommodation or government building should be heated so that it remains clear of ice and snow throughout the winter. The law provides that violations of these regulations are punishable by a fine or a jail sentence of up to 2 years; however, the country's main association for persons with disabilities complains that enforcement is lax and that penalties rarely are assessed for noncompliance.

Access to new buildings tends to be good, while efforts to make old buildings more accessible have lagged. A government committee was surveying systematically all state-owned buildings in the country to evaluate their accessibility. The Reykjavik city government, in cooperation with local associations representing bicycle riders and the blind, has been beveling sidewalks at intersections throughout the city to facilitate the movement of pedestrians, bicyclists, and persons in wheelchairs. The city is spending approximately \$175,000 (17.5 million krona) a year on this project, which it aims to have completed by 2006.

In 2000 the Supreme Court ruled that the extent to which the State was reducing social security payments to persons with disabilities based on the income of their able-bodied spouses was unconstitutional. The Court stated that the significant cuts in social security payments as a result of means testing violated constitutional protections regarding equality and support for persons with disabilities. In reaction to the ruling, Parliament passed legislation in January that increased the minimum payment to persons with disabilities who have able-bodied spouses. However, their social security benefits continued to be subject to a modified form of means testing. The Association of Disabled Persons protested that the legislation did not comply with the Supreme Court ruling and challenged the new law in court. There was no ruling by year's end.

While significant progress has been made in the last few years in addressing the concerns and needs of persons with physical disabilities, some mental health advocates fault the Government for not devoting sufficient attention and resources to the care of persons with mental disabilities.

#### National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities

Concern has been voiced, including by the Prime Minister, that the rapidly increasing number of foreigners being brought into the country to meet the labor shortage in fish processing and other less desirable

occupations could lead to future problems, especially in the event of an economic downturn. At the end of 2000, 8,824 foreigners were living in the country, or approximately 3 percent of the population, according to the National Statistical Office. However, persons of foreign origin constituted 4 or 5 percent of the population when account was taken of individuals who were born in foreign countries but have since become citizens. New work and residence permits were issued at a rate of approximately 150 per month during the year. Many of these "temporary" workers come from Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, and the Directorate of Immigration expected most of them to seek to remain permanently rather than return to their countries of origin. According to a 2000 opinion poll, 85 percent of foreigners were content with living in Iceland, and 40 percent were "unlikely" to return to their country of origin.

For several years, the City of Reykjavik has operated a highly regarded Intercultural Center that helps foreigners adjust to living in the country. In December the City of Reykjavik, in cooperation with surrounding towns and local NGO's, opened a larger and better staffed International House to replace the Intercultural Center.

Human rights monitors continued to express concern about an ultranationalist organization called "Iceland for Icelanders," which was founded in 1997 with the goal of limiting the further settlement of foreigners in the country to persons of European origin. In April the deputy leader of the organization was indicted for making disparaging remarks about foreigners in a newspaper interview. In October he was found guilty and fined \$300 (30,000 krona). There is no law that prohibits organizations that promote and incite racial discrimination.

## Section 6 Worker Rights

### a. The Right of Association

Workers make extensive use of the right provided by the Constitution to establish unions, draw up their own constitutions and rules, choose their own leaders and policies, and publicize their views. The resulting organizations are independent of the Government and political parties. Approximately 85 percent of all eligible workers belong to unions.

With the exception of limited categories of workers in the public sector whose services are essential to public health or safety, unions have the right to strike. During the year, there were minor strikes by air traffic controllers, hospital nurses, nurse assistants, physical therapists, municipal employees, and music teachers. In April and May, there was also a 6-week seamen's strike, which brought the fishing industry to a standstill. Concerned about the strike's effect on the economy, Parliament passed a law in May ordering the seamen to return to work and providing that the dispute be referred to binding arbitration. The arbitration panel handed down its decision in June, which was accepted by all parties (see Section 6.b.).

Unions are permitted to affiliate internationally, and they take active part in Nordic, European, and other international trade union bodies.

### b. The Right to Organize and Bargain Collectively

Union membership is not impeded by law or practice. Employers are required to withhold union dues (1 percent of gross pay) from the pay of all employees, whether or not they are union members, to help support, among other benefits, disability, strike, and pension funds to which all workers are entitled.

The various trade unions and management organizations periodically negotiate collective bargaining agreements that set specific terms for workers' pay, hours, and other conditions. Collective bargaining agreements were negotiated in 2000, and most will expire in either 2003 or 2004. The Government played only a minor role in the bargaining process, providing mediation assistance in a few cases (through the State Mediator's Office) while generally encouraging wage restraint to limit inflation. The new contracts provide that if inflation exceeds expectations during the first year, the unions have the right to seek renegotiation of the wage terms.

The Icelandic Federation of Labor (IFL) filed lawsuits in June and again in November charging that Parliament's intervention in the fish industry strike violated the seamen's constitutional rights to associate freely and to bargain collectively (see Section 6.a.). The case was ongoing at year's end. In December the IFL also filed a complaint about the Government's action with the International Labor Organization.

Labor courts effectively adjudicate disputes over contracts and over the rights provided for under the law, which prohibits antiunion discrimination. By law employers found guilty of antiunion discrimination are required to reinstate workers fired for union activities; however, in practice the charges often are difficult to prove.

There are no export processing or other special economic zones.

c. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

Forced or compulsory labor is prohibited by law; however, some women reportedly were trafficked into the country to work as striptease dancers or prostitutes (see Sections 5 and 6.f.). In addition work permit practices left newly arrived foreign workers vulnerable to abuse by employers (see Section 6.e.).

The law prohibits forced and bonded labor by children, and there were no reports that such practices occur.

d. Status of Child Labor Practices and Minimum Age for Employment

The law prohibits the employment of children younger than age 16 in factories, on ships, or in other places that are hazardous or require hard labor; this prohibition is observed in practice. Children 14 or 15 years old may be employed part time or during school vacations in light, nonhazardous work. Their work hours must not exceed the ordinary work-hours of adults in the same occupation. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration enforces child labor regulations effectively.

The Government ratified ILO Convention 182 on the worst forms of child labor in 2000, and it entered into force in May.

The law prohibits forced and bonded labor by children, and such practices are not known to occur (see Section 6.c.).

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

No minimum wage is mandated by law, but the minimum wages negotiated in various collective bargaining agreements apply automatically to all employees in those occupations, whether they are union members or not. Labor contracts afford even the lowest paid workers a sufficient income for a decent standard of living for themselves and their families.

Workers are protected by laws that effectively provide for their health and safety as well as for unemployment insurance, paid vacations, pensions, and reasonable working conditions and hours. The standard legal workweek is 40 hours, which includes nearly 3 hours of paid breaks per week. Work exceeding 8 hours in a workday must be compensated as overtime. Under changes that took effect during 2000, workers are entitled to 11 hours of rest (up from 10 hours previously) within each 24-hour period and to a day off every week. Under defined special circumstances, the 11-hour rest period can be reduced to 8 hours, but workers must then be compensated with 1.5 hours of rest for every hour received less than 11 hours. The day off can be postponed by a week, in which case the worker has a right to 2 additional hours off in the following week. Health and safety standards are set by Parliament and administered and enforced by the Ministry of Social Affairs through its Occupational Safety and Health Administration, which can and does close down workplaces until safety and health standards are met. Workers have a collective, not an individual, right to refuse to work in a place that does not meet the criteria of occupational safety and health. Firing workers who report unsafe or unhealthy conditions is illegal.

Human rights monitors expressed concern that in the case of newly arrived foreign workers or refugees (i.e., those who have been in the country for less than 3 years), the Government's practice of issuing applicable work permits to the employer rather than to the employee has left the worker vulnerable to abuse by the employer in some instances (see Section 5).

f. Trafficking in Persons

The law does not prohibit specifically trafficking in persons, although a number of legal provisions may be used to prosecute such cases; trafficking was suspected in connection with the hundreds of foreign women who entered the country to work in striptease clubs. The main concern was that some of the women, especially those from Eastern and Central Europe, were being brought to Iceland under false pretenses and then coerced to work as striptease dancers or prostitutes. While most attention has been focused on Iceland as a possible destination point for trafficked women, there were some cases during the year that indicated that the country was also being used as a transit point for the movement of trafficked women between mainland Europe and North America. There were no reliable estimates on how many women this may involve.

In May, for the first time, formal charges of coercion were filed against a club. Four striptease dancers from Estonia told police that a club owner had pressured them into prostitution. Two Danish dancers lodged a



similar complaint against the same employer. As of year's end, the cases remained under investigation, and no arrests had been made.

Parliament passed legislation in 2000 that closed a loophole that allowed striptease dancers to enter the country and perform without a work permit for up to 4 weeks under an exemption given for "artists." Any foreigner (except those from the European Economic Area) seeking to come to the country to work as a striptease dancer must first obtain a work permit, which is typically valid for 3 months. However, the Government has not yet put any numerical limits or other controls on the issuance of work permits for foreign striptease dancers. The clubs are allowed to bring in as many dancers as they want.

For the first several months that the new system was in place, the IFL vetted the work permit applications of foreign striptease dancers and ensured that their contracts afforded the minimal labor protections. However, the IFL announced in March that it would no longer take part in this process. Citing the suspicious circumstances under which these dancers come and work in Iceland, the IFL said it did not want to assist unwittingly in human trafficking. However, the Directorate of Labor decided that under the existing law, it had no choice but to continue issuing the work permits, even without the review of the IFL.

Human right monitors were critical of the fact that the striptease clubs continued to operate with few, if any, restrictions on their operations. There are no regulations, for example, mandating a minimal distance between dancers and patrons. A study on prostitution, commissioned by the Ministry of Justice and released in March, concluded that organized prostitution existed at some, if not all, of the striptease clubs. In the absence of national legislation, some municipalities have taken action on their own to prohibit the opening of striptease clubs within their jurisdictions. The City of Reykjavik was moving to restrict the location of new clubs to designated areas only. However, the changes were not expected to be retroactive and would not affect the existing clubs, most of which were located downtown.

Victims may seek assistance at the women's shelter, counseling center, and hospital, which are all government funded (see Section 5).